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ABSTRACT

There are clear signs that community learning is the way to a more sustainable future for Australian communities, especially rural ones. There are also indications that policymakers now recognize that the people who live in communities should play an important role in determining the future of their own communities. Policy must use the best knowledge from research and provide sufficient resources to build community capacity to learn, adapt, and change. That means a policy approach that builds social capital in communities. A learning community is building social capital as it learns, and a community with high levels of social capital will be a learning community. Strategies for building social capital/learning communities include creating opportunities for interaction; developing leadership skills; building ties within and across communities and between public and private institutions; and establishing brokers to build and maintain these ties. Policy that uses and builds social capital in communities and is most likely to produce sustainable outcomes has these features: a degree of program continuity; diversity at the local level; integrity of programs across levels of government and departments; knowledge resources that communities can draw upon; two-way networks between policymakers and communities; and recognition that social capital alone is not enough--policies must also be resourced with human, physical, and financial capital. (Contains 32 references.) (TD)

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Community Learning and Sustainability: Practice and Policy

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Keynote Address to First Conference on the Future of Australia's Country Towns, LaTrobe University, Bendigo, 29 June 2000

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Community learning and sustainability: Practice and policy

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The conference program tells us that the theme for today's deliberations is 'Policies and Directions'. This conference presentation is the second of three for me in three weeks; all three are about communities and public policy. The three venues are diverse.

The first was a small forum last week for policy makers at national and state levels, researchers and some people working in community development held at the Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia (CRLRA). Our aim was to bring these three groups together to discuss the linkages between research, policy and implementation of policy on the ground. Communication, networks, relationships and understanding of the other groups' often diverse values and viewpoints emerged as key ingredients in any strategy to improve linkages between research, policy and its implementation in communities. My third conference will be the Australian National Training Authority Conference in about ten days time where I will be part of a panel discussing learning communities' response to change. The three panellists' topics are to be research on learning communities, a case study of a learning community, and the implications for policy of learning communities. The fact that these three conferences or forums are being held suggests that learning, communities and the right kind of policy are seen as a way to a better, sustainable future for Australia, especially rural Australia.

Policy makers, politicians and public servants, are searching for the best way to make policy in a society that is telling them at the ballot box that what they have been doing, in rural Australia at least, isn't working. Rural communities are struggling to get their message heard and understood. Their cries for help are starting to be noticed, but how do they get the policy makers to understand that they want a say in what happens in their own communities? Policy makers and communities are starting to recognise that the old top down policy approach needs to be replaced by, or at least tempered with a bottom up approach to policy. Some policy development and programs that implement policy are reflecting more community input. These include the Victorian government's learning communities program, the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services (DFaCS) Stronger Communities Program and emerging natural resource management policy, reflected in the discussion paper *Managing Natural Resources in Rural Australia for a Sustainable Future: A discussion paper for developing a national policy* (Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Australia 1999).

Taking the natural resource management (NRM) paper as an example of bottom up involvement in developing and implementing policy, it proposes seven key policy directions:

- Working together effectively
- Devolving authority and empowering regions
- Investing more strategically at the regional level
- Facilitating fundamental change
- Building on the landcare ethic
- Capacity building for improved natural resource management
- Enhancing knowledge and information (Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Australia, 1999, pp. 15-17)

Most of these directions require communities to be involved in learning, especially learning how to work together and learning how to work with various levels of government. I was a member of the Reference Group for this project, and we were very conscious that what we proposed would challenge the institutional and human infrastructure of our regional communities. The Reference Group, Scientific Advisory Group and Commonwealth and State Government

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Representative Group together brought a wide range of expertise in natural resource management and the human aspects of managing change. From our discussions and deliberations over a period of 12 months it became very clear that the best way to achieve long-term social, economic and environmental benefits for all Australians from our natural resources is to empower regional communities to manage their own natural resources. Hence policy directions that will enhance skills and abilities in decision making and leadership, as well as technical knowledge and skills to develop and adopt best management practices. New skills are not only required at the community/regional level; the first policy direction, working together effectively, requires changes in the way governments work with communities. There has been a very high positive public response to the discussion paper. The next step is getting agreement on how to proceed from the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments.

A new policy approach that includes a strong 'bottom up' component raises three important questions.

- What do we know works in managing change to achieve social, economic and/or environmental sustainability in rural communities?
- What skills and resources do communities need if they are to have effective input into policy development and implementation?
- What skills and resources do policy makers, especially public servants, need if they are engage in effective two-way communication with communities and work with communities in implementing policy? I include appropriate and flexible arrangements for accountability as part of resources.

My intention in this presentation is to concentrate on answering the first question, drawing on research. This question could be rephrased as two questions: 'what makes an effective learning community?' and 'what kinds of interventions foster community learning and sustainable communities?'. In answering this question some of the skills and resources required by communities for dialog and working with policy makers, and others outside the community will emerge. The question of the skills and resources needed by policy makers and those implementing policies I will leave for you to ponder.

What makes an effective learning community?

The following section examines learning communities from three perspectives: regions which are made up of communities (macro perspective), the individuals who live in communities (micro perspective), and finally the perspective of whole communities such as country towns that are the focus of this conference (meso perspective).

Macro perspective – learning regions

The fields of economics and regional development recognise that regions where businesses interact in a process of collective learning will create new knowledge and ways of working that give the region a competitive advantage (see for example Porter 1990, Lundvall 1992, Maskell & Malmberg 1999). Economic and social benefits for residents of a region flow from an ability to learn together (Lundvall 1999).

What makes a region a learning region?

Research suggests the presence of networks and policies to develop appropriate skills make a region a learning region. Regions with strong networks between enterprises, community organisations and public organisations are best able to restructure and adapt (Hugonnier 1999). Hugonnier's meta analysis of factors influencing the growth or decline of regional economies in OECD countries also found that policies linking training to the needs of firms, especially small- and medium-sized firms, were a feature of growing regional economies. Studies in Europe and the UK consistently show a relationship between the level and appropriateness of the qualifications of the labour force and the rate of new firm establishment in regions (for example, Keeble & Walker 1994, Davidsson et al. 1994, Fritsch 1992, Gudgin & Fothergill 1984).

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It is informative to consider what causes regions to decline. Maskell and Malmsberg (1999, 178-179) suggest three reasons. First erosion of institutions (*asset erosion*), for example through cuts in public expenditure, which reduces interaction in learning networks. We could speculate that funding cuts to agricultural research stations in regional areas could have this effect. Second, *substitution*, where technological advance rapidly devalues the assets of a region. Third, *regional lock-in*, which is when social and cultural institutions cling to yesterday's ways of doing things and cannot un-learn rapidly enough for new development. Un-learning old ways is as important as learning new ones when it comes to adjusting to change.

The natural resource management policy discussion paper is based on the regional level. The evidence from the literature presented here suggests regions need to be helped to develop learning networks if the policy is to be effective.

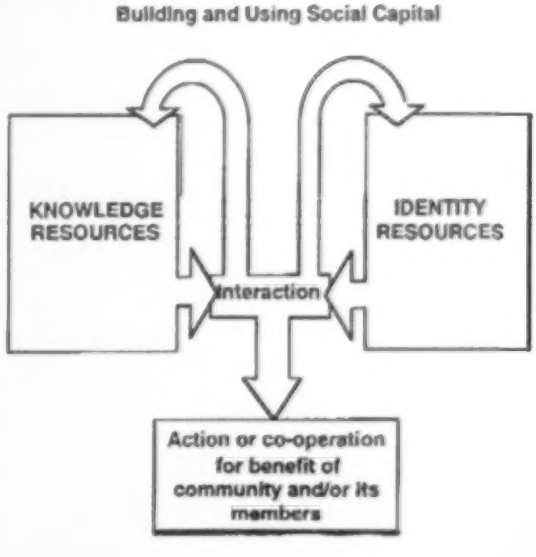
Micro perspective – learning individuals

Learning is a complex process that goes beyond simple acquisition or creation of new knowledge and skills. Newman (1999, p. 85) suggests that learning has a transformative aspect, which has to do with understanding values, ideas and pressure from peers that constrain the way we think and act. Learning interactions take place between individuals, sometimes mediated by text or other media. Networks enable people within a community to come together to share their values and interests (Lane & Dorfman 1997), just as networks operate at regional levels to allow collective learning. CRLRA research shows how a community builds 'social capital' through the learning interactions of its members as they go about making economically driven changes (Kilpatrick & Bell 1998a) and in everyday activities (Falk & Kilpatrick 2000, Falk & Harrison 1998).

What is social capital?

Putnam (1993) suggests that social capital is the networks, norms (or values) and trust present in a community that facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit. Social capital is a resource that is shared among the individual members of a community. I am discussing social capital under the heading of 'learning individuals' because CRLRA research has found that social capital is both built and used in learning interactions between individuals. Our research has found that people bring two kinds of resources with them when they interact; knowledge resources and identity resources (Falk & Kilpatrick 2000).

Figure 1 Learning interactions


Building and Using Social Capital
KNOWLEDGE RESOURCES
IDENTITY RESOURCES
Interaction
Action or co-operation for benefit of community and/or its members

Knowledge resources are a knowledge of who, when and where to go for advice or resources and knowledge of how to get things done. *Identity resources* are the ability and willingness (commitment) to act for the benefit of the community and its members. Knowledge and identity resources allow community members to combine their skills and knowledge (or human capital) with the knowledge and skills of others to produce some action or cooperation for the benefit of the community or its members.

It should be noted that not all interactions have positive or beneficial outcomes for individuals or communities. The quality of the action outcome depends on the social capital available and drawn on in interactions. We suggest that the quality of the knowledge and identity resources (micro level social capital) accessed in the interaction, and the quality of the community level social capital (discussed below) determines the quality of the outcomes.

Informal or deliberately arranged interactions can help people get to know each other, and develop networks. The interactions can also increase people's confidence to act for the benefit of the community and its members, and build a commitment to members of the community and the community as a whole. As well, learning interactions can build or strengthen knowledge and identity resources, and so build social capital. The quality of the social capital that is built again depends on the quality of the knowledge and identity resources used in the interaction.

Before individuals are willing and able to take share their knowledge and skills with others in community learning, they must have the skills, values and attitudes that allow them to participate in community learning interactions. Self-confidence, and self-efficacy more generally, are important elements of these skills, values and attitudes (Falk & Kilpatrick 2000, CRLRA 2000). Building self-confidence in members of the community is both a prerequisite for the use of other skills for the benefit of the community, and frequently an outcome of education and training programs designed to build specific skills (for example job specific skills) (Kilpatrick, Johns & Rosenblatt 2000).

Meso perspective – learning communities

The operation of regional networks highlights the social embededness of the economy and learning (Granovetter 1985). CRLRA's research into managing change through learning in communities has highlighted the importance of relationships between people and the formal and informal infrastructure of communities to the quality of outcomes experienced by communities, the businesses within them and individuals (for example, Falk & Kilpatrick 2000, Kilpatrick, Bell & Falk 1999). We have found that social capital facilitates change in communities by 'oiling' the process of learning through accessing, sharing and creating knowledge, skills and values.

Networks within and beyond the community, enabling leadership, and community norms and values that accept diversity, yet include some shared norms and values are three aspects of social capital that help communities to be learning communities.

Several writers have stressed the importance of the capacity of individuals to come together and share their knowledge and skills to solve local problems (Kretzmann & McKnight 1993, Lane & Dorfman 1997). Partnerships and collaboration in communities mean that a wider range of skills are acquired by people, and this enhances community capacity to manage change (Sommerlad, Duke & McDonald 1998, Dickie & Stewart Weeks 1999).

Intra-community networks are also referred to as bonding (or 'strong') ties. The presence of bridging (or 'weak') ties between groups within a community and between communities, and linking ties with public and private institutions, in addition to bonding ties, has a positive impact on community sustainability (Woolcock 1999, Narayan 1999, Granovetter 1973). The right mix of the three kinds of ties strengthens the social capital of the community by giving it an external dimension. This enables the community to deal with internal and external problems or changes through access to a wide range of internal and external knowledge, skills and resources.

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Brokers, who can speak the languages of people in the community and people outside, can play an important role in establishing and maintaining internal and external ties. Brokers can be institutions such as schools and local government, or individuals (Kilpatrick & Bell 1998b). They can for example help match training provision to local needs by working with organisations in the community to identify needs and negotiating the delivery of suitable training with providers within and external to the community (Kilpatrick & Bound 1999). This will overcome situations such as that found in a study of two rural towns in NSW where the scarcity of suitably skilled or qualified personnel and lack of awareness of training possibilities were the major impediments to new firm formation (Epps 1999).

Leadership, along with networks, is part of the human infrastructure of a community. Leadership can help focus the energies of a community. Leadership that facilitates formation and maintenance of strong partnerships and networks within and beyond communities assists communities to manage change (CRLRA 2000, Flora et al. 1997). Such leadership can be called enabling leadership. Enabling leadership is able to initiate projects and programs, and also encourages sharing of leadership roles and responsibilities (Falk 2000). Enabling leadership fosters the development of conflict resolution skills and the ability of people to work as a team.

Strong social capital is associated with tolerance of diversity (Onyx & Bullen 1997). Learning communities respect diversity, and are also able to find or develop some common values and shared visions for their community (Kilpatrick, Bell & Falk 1999). Learning communities recognise and value the history of all groups within the community, and are able to use that valued knowledge in managing change. Histories of past courses of action are vital in determining future actions. Just as regions need to be able to un-learn institutional social and cultural practices in order to change and move forward, so the institutional structures present in a community can facilitate or hinder learning interactions and implementation of the outcomes of learning interactions.

How do you build and nurture a learning community?

Our work at CRLRA leads us to argue that a learning community is building social capital as it learns, and that a community with high levels of social capital will be a learning community. Some practical strategies to build networks (or bonding, bridging and linking ties), enabling leadership and norms and values that are shared, yet tolerant of diversity emerge from our research. Practical strategies include:

- Create opportunities for interaction
  - *Events and meetings* are scheduled and unscheduled occasions for 'social' engagement. Meetings can be in person, by phone or on the Internet.
  - *Communication sites* include local radio; newspapers; Web sites and electronic communication infrastructure such as bulletin boards; meeting places including halls, meeting rooms, malls, main streets and even skate parks.
- Develop leadership skills, remembering self-confidence is a pre-requisite for other personal development
- Foster externality (bridging and linking ties)
- Establish brokers to build and maintain bridging and linking ties

Social capital built and used at the three levels; macro, meso and micro is interlinked. The building and use of social capital can be pictured as in Figure 2.

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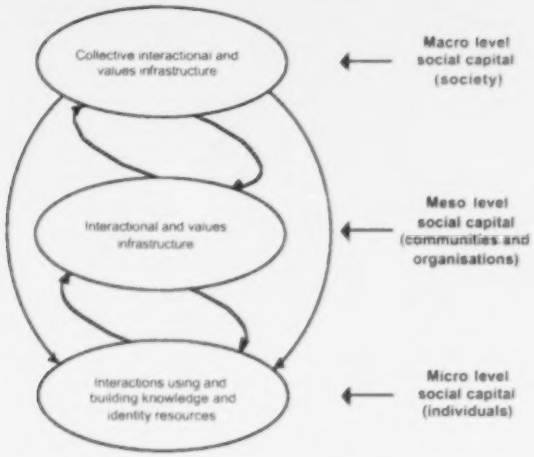
Figure 2 Levels of social capital


Collective interactional and values infrastructure
Macro level social capital (society)
Interactional and values infrastructure
Meso level social capital (communities and organisations)
Interactions using and building knowledge and identity resources
Micro level social capital (individuals)

Policy interventions for learning communities

Programs and activities in communities that have a degree of continuity and connectedness to the community are more successful (CRLRA 2000). These programs recognise and take account of the history of the community; they consider where people are coming from, their skills and values, and the institutions and culture of the community. They recognise that learning is an incremental process, building on existing knowledge, skills, values and institutional practices. Programs that recognise and take account of the particular vision or visions of the community give a future dimension to the continuity. Continuity is about programs, staff and institutional arrangements that do not stop and start, or chop in and out, but rather evolve and change in a way that recognises and builds on the past. Continuity develops trust within communities, and between communities and governments that administer programs. We have coined the term 'Principle of Interconnectivity' to describe the two elements of good practice policy interventions/programs; community connection and continuity over time. Local planning and bottom up policy development are much more likely to take these factors into account than centralist, top down policy. Taking account of community connection and continuity may account for much of the success of local planning and involvement in policy development and implementation.

I started this presentation by talking about policy, research and the implementation of policies in communities. Now that we have looked at some of the research, what can we say about good practice in policy interventions to foster community learning and sustainable communities?

Features of good policy for community sustainability

Policy that uses and builds social capital in communities, and is most likely to produce sustainable outcomes has these features:

- A degree of continuity of programs
  - too much change, and norms and values can't cope
- Allows diversity at the local level (connectedness to communities)
  - this means less direct control from the centre
- Integrity of programs across levels of government and departments (or policy 'silos')
- Creates knowledge resources that communities can draw upon
- Builds two way networks between policy makers and communities
- Both builds and uses the social capital of communities

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- Recognises that social capital alone is not enough; policies also need to be resourced with human, physical and financial capital.

How does the NRM policy measure up?

Building on landcare is a key policy direction, suggesting a degree of continuity of programs.

Other policy directions are "devolving authority and empowering regions/catchments" and "enabling regional communities to determine the mixture of mechanisms...that is most appropriate for encouraging changes in land use and management" (Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries 1999, pp. 14 and 15). This is consistent with diversity at the local level.

The NRM policy development has involved Commonwealth and State departments of agriculture and environment, and aims to have the three spheres of government moving forward together more effectively (p.14). However, public submissions criticised the policy for being too narrow in focus, saying that a national NRM policy needs to encompass all sectors of the economy, not primarily agriculture, and all environments, including rural, peri-urban, urban, and coastal / marine. More work is needed to achieve integrity across the policy silos.

The NRM policy talks of "creating knowledge and improving access and use of information and research and development" (Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries 1999, accompanying flyer). "Moreover, understanding what motivates people to adopt or reject new management practices... is important" (p. 79). The policy discussion paper recognises that knowledge creation and access to knowledge is important. We have already noted that learning is a complex process that goes beyond simple acquisition or creation of new knowledge and skills (Newman 1999). Will we be able to create the knowledge and foster the learning 'effort' required to translate the knowledge into practice?

"Working together effectively" is a policy direction that involves two way networks between policy makers and communities. "Capacity building for improved natural resource management" includes training leaders or champions in communities among other aspects of skill development that should build social capital resources. Can sufficient 'capacity' be built for the challenge of working together effectively to manage Australia's natural resources for us all?

Will the final version of the NRM policy, manifested in the policies of local, state and Commonwealth policy 'silos', live up to the hopes of its creators? We must wait and see.

Conclusion

There are clear signs that community learning is the way to a more sustainable future for our communities, especially rural ones. There are also indications that policy makers now recognise that the people who live in communities have an important role to play in determining the future of their own communities. The NRM discussion paper for developing a national policy illustrates that recognition. The challenge for us all is in the implementation. We must ensure that policy really does use the best knowledge from research and provide sufficient resources to build the capacity of communities to learn, adapt and change. That means a policy approach that builds social capital in communities, including bridging and linking ties with policy makers. This is especially a challenge for those accustomed to a top down, highly accountable model of policy based around traditional policy 'silos'.

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